



MEPI

MIDDLE EAST
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QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER



DEMOCRACY

Democracy by the Numbers

For Hafez Al Bukari, starting Yemen's first polling center has meant subjecting himself to scrutiny by security forces as well as concerns from those he is trying to poll that he is a spy. But this freelance journalist — who is working in a country where political competition is a recent phenomenon — is hopeful for the future.

"The government needs to know it won't have power without the people," he said. And he believes his polls provide accountability where there is very little. In a country where the radio, TV and print media are influenced or owned by the government, it is often difficult to obtain objective information about local and national issues.



So Hafez decided to do just that. His poll on the September presidential election helped capture a change that was going on in the hearts of the Yemeni people, which the government-controlled institutions and media were unable to document.

"The media in Yemen is more like a PR machine for the elite," he said. "There's no interest in public opinion or feedback."

So, eight years after studying the theoretical concept of polling during his schooling in mass communications, he approached the government about getting a license to start Yemen's first polling center, now called the Yemen Polling Center. After two years, rejections from two ministries, and the intervention of high-level officials, Hafez got the license.

While some credit the media's publication of the results of his poll on the presidential election with helping stimulate a more robust political contest, Hafez is the first to say that political parties as well as mainstream civil society actors still do not fully appreciate the value of polling. One way he is trying to overcome this problem is by involving them in focus groups and providing training for them. For example, he is training staffers of the Yemeni Chamber of Commerce in how to do polling and will train political parties to use polls for candidate selection.

His field workers, who receive training in scientific polling techniques through the Middle East Partnership Initiative, are still learning how to do objective polling and must often travel great distances in areas where there are few paved roads to ensure that every segment of the population is represented. However, Hafez knows that building awareness will help bring change. He said, "This work is most important to state-building. Polling creates an awareness of what [civil] institutions are created for."

He has taken risks, from asking people how often they read the Quran to whether they think it is appropriate to have a military leader ruling the country. In doing so, Hafez has taken a symbolic space in every Yemeni's living room by asking them to reflect on their deepest values: their beliefs in democracy, faith and commitment to their community. And he's giving those values a voice.

MEPI Alumni Network Launches

To provide ongoing support to people who have participated in MEPI programs, the U.S. Department of State has launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative Alumni Network. The network, facilitated by AMIDEAST through a grant from MEPI, will accelerate the momentum of those working to advance reforms and bring greater peace and prosperity to the people of the Middle East.

The MEPI Alumni Network, which is beginning in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen, offers MEPI alumni opportunities to network with each other, organize training and development activities, and have wide-ranging discussions on issues such as unemployment, women's rights, democratic change, and human rights.

Because participants in MEPI programs have ranged in age from school children to senior opinion leaders, and represent all sectors of society, the MEPI Alumni Network is being created to support a wide range of participants and to encourage their interaction. This diversity will be reflected in local alumni chapter steering committees, which will provide leadership and vision for the alumni network, so it can be sustained and useful over time.

Financial Times Highlights MEPI Alumni

In a recent story about the experience and diversity of Arab businesswomen, the *Financial Times* highlighted Imen Bakhouché of Tunisia and Hanan Saab of Lebanon. Both women are alumni of the Middle East Entrepreneur Training in the U.S. program, which helps promising executives, managers and entrepreneurs build successful, growing enterprises that contribute to economic growth and community well-being in the Middle East and North Africa.



Financial Times focused on “emerging role models on the business scene.” It described how Bakhouché “caught dotcom fever” in the late 1990s and went on to start NetConcept, a Web-development company. The story said Saab “spotted a niche” in hospital pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, leading her to create the company Pharmamed, which is now active in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf countries.



Business Hub Boosting Women's Advocacy

The Bahrain Businesswomen's Society, which is one of eight businesswomen's network hubs in the region supported by MEPI, has reached nearly 1,000 people with its professional development and civic engagement activities over the last year. The Bahrain hub's most recent expert speaker addressed the issue of effective advocacy through civil society, with a specific focus on reforming family laws.

The leader of the Bahrain Businesswomen's Society, Afnan Al Zayani, is one of the first people to take on the sensitive subject of family law and successfully bring it into the realm of the private sector. Business and civil society are now working actively as a team to deal with this and other important issues of the day.

"We want to look at ways of lobbying and how civil societies can participate in a democratic country. Rather than talking and complaining we should voice our opinions through democratic channels and strategic planning," Al Zayani said in the *Gulf Daily News*.



Arab Student Leaders Start Summer in the U.S.

More than 110 students from 15 countries in the Middle East and North Africa have arrived in the U.S. for a six-week academic program examining the principles of democracy and the organization of the U.S. political system and the roles of political parties and the media. The students are living on college campuses,



where they attend lectures, roundtable discussions, and meetings with academics and civic leaders. The Study of the U.S. Institutes for Student Leaders program also addresses core concepts such as the rule of law, individual rights, freedom of expression, tolerance, volunteerism, and community involvement, while encouraging the further development of personal leadership skills.

Universities hosting the students with support from the Middle East Partnership Initiative are Georgetown University in Washington, DC; University of Delaware in Newark, DE; Benedictine University in

Lisle, IL; Montana State University in Bozeman, MT; and Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA. Following the summer institutes, students will return to their countries, where they will continue undergraduate studies and carry out civic projects inspired by their MEPI experience.



News from MEPI Regional Offices Abu Dhabi and Tunis

Roundtables with a Twist

A Tunisian NGO is turning its roundtables into a forum to spur broad public debate.

DEFI Media, making use of a MEPI small grant, recently launched the first in a series of discussion sessions designed to bring together ministers, private-sector representatives, academics, and journalists to share their views on pressing issues of the day. While the conversations are enlightening in and of themselves, the twist comes after the talking is over.

Through these targeted roundtables, DEFI Media and its local partner, the press group Dar Assabah, are distributing supplements in two leading Tunisian newspapers to increase public awareness on these issues.

In this way, some 60,000 readers gain access to the results of these open debates, conducted by experts on key reform subjects, such as good governance, the rule of law, and civil society development. Many more people will learn about the issues as they are posted in electronic format on the newspapers' Web sites or through word of mouth.

Roundtable topics will include the free trade agreement between Tunisia and the United States; the role of the media in combating extremism; areas of divergence and convergence between the United States and the Arab world; and the role of civil society in Tunisia.

To evaluate the impact of the roundtable discussions, DEFI Media plans to conduct online surveys that will enable readers to know how others felt about the topics being discussed – yet another innovative twist intended to further expand public debate.

The 21st Century Emirati Woman: Public Speaking Contest

Six Zayed University students have been named public speaking champions at competitions titled “The 21st Century Emirati Woman: My Future as a Citizen and Leader.”

Speech contest winners have been invited to participate in specialized leadership training as part of a MEPI-funded project that encourages young women's participation and leadership in public life and raises public awareness of the important role of women in the future of the UAE.



Eight student finalists on each ZU campus competed in the finals of the competition with original speeches on May 22 in Dubai and on May 23 in Abu Dhabi. Finalists spoke of their goals of being leaders in politics, media, IT, community and family.

In her speech on the Abu Dhabi campus, Noor Saif Nasser Moahmmmed Al Suwaidi told the audience: “What makes us qualified to be future leaders is based on what we do today as university students, from gaining experience to learning new tools. It is what you are today that gives you the reasons to become a future leader, and my reason for wanting to become a leader is the love I have for my country and community.”

In her speech on the Dubai campus, Mona Mohammed Abdulla Mohammed Musmari said: “I think it is very difficult to lead today when people are not truly participating in decisions. If you don’t give people an opportunity to really be engaged, they won’t stay.”

Prior to the speech contest, finalists took part in a series of four public speaking and leadership communication skills workshops with 200 other Zayed University students.

Murjan Mohamed Yousuf Mohamed said, “The workshops really helped me realize the characteristics of a successful public speaker and helped in shaping who I want to be.”

Hussa Salem Al Romaithin added that the workshops taught her “to be passionate and to work hard in order to reach my goals and most importantly to be positive not only in speech but in everything in life.”



For more information on MEPI, please visit
<http://www.mepi.state.gov>.

***Supporting the aspirations of people in the Middle East
seeking greater freedom and opportunity.***